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Ghosts of Christmas Past

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Every December 25th the normally phlegmatic British let down their hair and plunge into an orgy of fun which one would normally associate with the people of more exuberant nations.

Complete strangers wish one another a Happy Christmas as a parting greeting and the public houses are filled with revelers strenuously keeping up the spirit of the season of goodwill.

Few of these light-hearted souls will be aware that the celebration of Christmas had its origins in the pagan worship of the Sun or, for that matter, that the funny hats, the evergreens and the festive board have nothing whatsoever to do with Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, but rather with the older gods worshipped by our ancestors in the twilight world of pre-Christmas Europe.

It is strange to consider that the presence of pork on the Christmas table and the custom of carrying in the boar's head was once associated with the sacrifice of a sacred Boar to the Sun god. At the festival of Frey, the dispenser of rain and sunshine in the mythology of Northern Europe, a boar was a good luck offering for the New Year and its head, with an apple in its mouth, was borne into the banqueting-hall amid singing and the sound of welcoming trumpets. Later in history, the boar's head gave way to the goose and the turkey. But where this custom survives, it should be seen as one of the many curious ghosts of Christmas past.

Consider the evergreens and their modern counterparts: the paper-chains which festoon the house at Christmastide. The evergreen was once the symbol of immortality, declared sacred to the Teutonic nations, and given pride of place in celebrations associated with the Winter Solstice from which our modern Christmas is descended.

As a symbol, the evergreen means constancy and eternity, and even in the Orient we find that it expresses a similar idea, for the Japanese believe the evergreen needle brings longevity and prosperity. The holly, especially, brings happiness and friendship, but if kept in the house after New Year's Day misfortune is ordained. Generally speaking, however, all evergreens must be taken down by Twelfth Night- then all will be well.

When we look around the room that has been decked with the regalia of the Christmas party our eyes inevitably settle on one of the focal points, the mistletoe. In pagan times, it was customary to celebrate the death of the old year and the birth of the new by kissing under the mistletoe's berries. Old enemies were then expected to forget their

quarrels and take a ceremonial kiss, promising to live in amity from that time forth.

It is not generally known that the mistletoe became a powerful life symbol because it grew' berries in winter when other plant life seemed dead. Once known as All Heal, it was employed as an ingredient in many folk medicines. It was the golden bough of the ancient Druids and, because of its association with sacrificial ceremonies, was outlawed by the Church as an emblem of paganism.

Oddly enough, the sole exception was York Minster where a sprig of mistletoe was placed on the altar each Christmas. A general pardon for crimes remained in force throughout that city for as long as it remained there.

The central symbol of the Christmas scene, the evergreen Christmas tree, had its origins in Germany where St. Boniface cut down a sacred oak which was worshipped by the pagans and, to placate them, offered a fir tree in its place. However, later research indicates that traces of a similar custom existed in other lands, notably Greece and Rome, where trees were decorated at the time of year later dedicated to Christmas. There is also reason for believing that the same or a similar custom was known in ancient Egypt.

The mystical heritage of Christmas is very strongly represented in one of the principal characters in the celebrations, Santa Claus, the embodiment of the spirit of goodwill. The name Santa Claus is in fact a corruption of the fifth century St. Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra, who was honored with special ceremonies by the Greeks and Romans on December 6th, later changed to December 25th.

This distinctly un- ghostlike genus of happiness was a 'reincarnation' of Odin, God of the Scandinavians who, on the conversion of Northern Europe to Christianity, was transformed first into St. Nicholas and later into the modern Father Christmas.

Christmas has no equal as a religious feast; it is the most important as well as the most enjoyable festival of the entire year. Yet even the good things spread out on the table have their religious aspects, particularly the mince-pies which were originally fashioned in the shape of small cribs in honor of the Christ Child.

Among the superstitions associated with mince-pies is one which demands that the Christmas reveler makes a pilgrimage among his neighbors and friends demanding the gift of a mince-pie wherever he calls. For each one eaten, so goes the tradition, the visitor may expect a month's good health for the ensuing year.

Originally, mince-pies contained a far more potent filling than mere mincemeat. They were stuffed with flesh of game hashed together with pickled mushrooms. One should always make a wish when taking the first bite of the first mince-pie of the season.

The Christmas pudding qualifies as a magical ritual in its own right, for it is surrounded by the most curious ceremonies. Prior to the 18th century the pudding was known as Plum Porridge and was a concoction of plums, spices, wines, meat broth and bread crumbs. It was eaten in a semi-liquid state and only later in its history were the plums replaced by raisins.

To preserve good luck, the pudding should be stirred deosil or clockwise: a ceremony known to most psychic cooks. Lucky charms and silver coins have to be incorporated in the mix to bring good fortune to the eater, usually a silver coin, a silver thimble and a ring, with the following meanings: the silver coin brings good luck; the ring promises a happy marriage to the girl who finds it; while the thimble hints that she is likely to remain a spinster.

The most interesting feature of Christmas pudding lore is the custom of setting fire to the brandy, so that the pudding can be brought to the table all aflame. This is a curious reminder that in ancient times special fires were lit at the midwinter feast to honor the Sun god.

One ghost which has been finally exorcised from the Christmas scene is the Dumb Cake which in times past was prepared by single girls for consumption on Christmas Eve. Its ingredients were salt, wheat-meal and barley, and it had to be baked in complete silence. It was carefully placed in the oven and the front door opened precisely at

midnight. The specter of the girl's future husband was expected to enter the house at that time and march into the kitchen to turn the cake. In some areas the cook would prick her initials on the cake and in due course her future husband would materialize to add his initials to hers. Alas, this custom seems to have vanished for ever.

The modern Christmas cake is still with us. It is supposed to have originated with a cake presented by the people of ancient Rome to their senators. A custom among Scots demanded that the cook should rise in the early hours of Christmas Day and bake sowen (oatmeal) cakes. These were distributed to the family at Hogmanay. If a cake happened to break, bad luck followed, but if it remained unbroken the eater could look forward to a Happy New Year.

Although there is no clear-cut tradition that Christmas Day was ever associated with the giving of presents prior to modern times, it is known that a similar custom was observed by the Romans on New Year's Day. The Roman gift would have been a goodwill symbol only, consisting of branches of evergreen, but in time the presents became more lavish.

Many of the enjoyable rituals which involve our lives at Christmas time are but the shadow survivals or 'ghosts' of very ancient customs performed around the close of the old year and the birth of the new, and the feast of fire celebrated at the time of the Winter Solstice to honor the Sun god.

But the season of fire and light, as it is sometimes called, would be nothing without the Yule-log, for Christmas is also known as Yule, which was the Scandinavian feast of the Winter Solstice.

In the days of old, an oak log was cut down on Yule Eve, and borne with much ceremony into the house and rolled onto the huge fire that was to burn during the days of the Nativity, especially Christmas Day. Little did the pious Christians of the medieval world realize that originally it had been burned in honor of the god Thor and represented the sacred element: fire.

No doubt it was due to this association with the old gods that the hearth fire at Christmas assumed the important role which it retained until the advent of artificial forms of heating. The hearth was the center for the telling of Christmas ghost stories and for those curious superstitions relating to the mysteries of fire.

Throughout Northern Europe there were traditions that the family ghosts returned at Christmas time to share the festival with their living relatives. In Brittany there was the custom of leaving food for the ghosts while the family attended church. In Scandinavia, stories were told of trolls (who were ogres not ghosts) returning at this season to rattle the window-panes. In the British Isles there were contradictory beliefs, some people thought, erroneously, that no ghost had power to haunt during the Christmas season.

It is when the light is extinguished save for the glowing embers that the ghost-story teller comes into his own and, surrounded by the family, describes some ancient haunting which is calculated to chill the blood of his listeners. Traditional hauntings include the posthumous adventures of Anne Boleyn who haunts her old homes during the Christmas season. Her ghost has been reported at Rochford Hall in Essex and Hever Castle in Kent, wandering headless during the 12 days of the festival.

There are a number of cheerless proverbs which surface at the season of goodwill, as when someone observes, 'A green Christmas brings a full church-yard,' possibly to counteract any excessive exuberance among the party.

However, the children turn to less ghostly rituals, including divination to discover the future. Each of them cuts an apple and counts the pips. The one whose apple has the most pips can look forward to the most happiness in the 12 months ahead.

And so young and old join in quiet communion with Christmases past, present and future, united in quaint ceremonies whose origins are lost in history - a celebration presided over by ancestral spirits who have been lured into the home from outer darkness by the glow of the pagan fire.

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